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Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

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"The Lovers"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 14, 1956*

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Lovers"

The New York Times

May 11, 1956

Theatre: 'The Lovers'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

LESLIE STEVENS, who startled the town with "Bullfight" two seasons ago, has now written an impressive work of art.

Call it pure art. For "The Lovers," which was magnificently acted at the Martin Beck last evening, is not related to anything except what is right and wrong in the eyes of God. It is set in the twelfth century in France, and it concerns the relationship of the lords to the peasantry.

Infatuated with the beauty of a peasant maid who is about to be married, the lord of the region reinvokes a right that has passed out of usage—"droit du seigneur," according to which the lord has the right to the marriage night before the husband possesses the bride.

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To us that seems like a monstrous betrayal of everything that is human or sacred. So it seems to the peasants in Mr. Stevens' elegy. The peasants appeal to the church in vain. They revolt. In the violence that ensues, the bride kills herself. The lord and the husband kill each other in a struggle over her body. What remains is to decide whether those three bodies can be buried with the blessing of the church in sanctified ground or whether they shall be eternally damned.

The story is somber, primitive and absorbing. But "The Lovers" is distinguished for the manner in which Mr. Stevens tells it. In the first place, he is a theatre poet. He tells the story in terms of the theatre—weaving time into a figured fabric; blending the present spiritual inquiries with past events; pitting one force against another by figures shown as sculpture on a platform; opposing human beings with awful shields or grim costumes that represent the power of the church or the state. In form "The Lovers" is spontaneously theatrical.

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In the second place, Mr. Stevens writes prose with a quiet simplicity that communicates deep feeling about the human destinies and the spiritual problems which emerge from the theme. The characters are described with grace, pity and insight. Nobody is a villain. Everyone is driven by a force more ruthless than he is. Everyone tries to defer to the others. Yet so relentlessly has Mr. Stevens drawn the cords of his tragedy that everyone is trapped in a conflict that destroys him. Both the prose and the form of "The Lovers" indicate that the theatre has acquired an uncommonly gifted writer.

Although the fluid form offers a real challenge to the director, Michael Gordon has staged the drama brilliantly. Charles Elson's setting consists of a series of platforms against a wide, deep, brooding sky that varies in tone and image with the mood of the scene. For costumes, John Boyt has designed simple garments for the peasants and uniforms and martial equipment for the lords, thus expressing the dramatic conflict in color and shape.

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Perhaps the actors might be persuaded to speak up more boldly. Anxious not to overact, they speak in too low a key. But it would be impossible to overpraise the characterizations: Darren McGavin's handsome lord, whose power is great but whose instincts are tender; Hurd Hatfield's humble monk with a willingness to make a heroic decision; Mario Alcalde's tragic husband; Joanne Woodward's artless but lovely bride; Vivian Nathan's desperate peasant woman who will not surrender her conviction; Morris Carnovsky's sorrowfully submissive elder; Bramwell Fletcher's imperious Bishop of Metz—these are only a few of the actors, but they contribute their share to the severe beauty of the performance.

The theme of "The Lovers" is odd and unlikely, and the concept of theatre is unfamiliar. But Mr. Stevens is in control of both at every moment. Approaching the theatre like a poet, he solves his problems by the seriousness of his point of view and the taste, sensitivity and glow of his writing.

"THE LOVERS"

Play by Leslie Stevens; staged by Michael Gordon; lighting and setting by Charles Elson; costumes by John Boyt; presented by the Playwrights' Company and Gayle Stine at the Martin Beck Theatre, May 10, 1956. The cast:

Grigoris.....Hurd Hatfield
Clothilde.....Vivian Nathan
Sextus.....Earl Montgomery
Xegan.....Norman Rose
Mattiew.....Robert Jacquin
Simon.....Harry Bergman
Voic Sturmer..William Bramley
Marc.....Mario Alcalde
Douane.....Joanne Woodward
Chrysagon de la Crux.....
Darren McGavin
Blaise.....Gerald Hiken
Draco de la Crux...Robert Burr
Austrict de la Crux.....
Pernell Roberts
Herstal de la Crux.....
Robert Lansing
Probus.....Morris Carnovsky
Tomas.....Gayne Sullivan
Saul.....George Ebeling
Lisanne.....Kathe Snyder
Mairese.....Frances Chaney
Ironsmith.....George Tyne
Millwright....George Berkeley
Wheelwright.....Bert Conway
Escavalon.....Lester Rawlins
Clement of Netz.....
Bramwell Fletcher

Daily Mirror

May 11, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'The Lovers' Opens At the Martin Beck

• Playwrights Company, Gayle Stine give play stunning production.

In "The Lovers," Leslie Stevens has sought to revive poetic tragedy on Broadway. He has penned a play after the manner of "Paolo and Francesca," filled with period romance, with passions that must inevitably spell death. The motivation for it all is "the right of the first night."

This custom of the Middle Ages permitted a seigneur to take a vassal groom's place with the bride on the wedding night. In this instance, the lord is reluctant to restore the young woman to her husband, after he has exacted his due privilege, thus stirring up a revolt among the people of his domain.

THE BRIDE, torn between affection for her spouse and fascinated by the ardor of the knight of the manor, falls upon a scythe in the fields, as the best way out of her dilemma. Whereupon her rival suitors battle to the death. The unfortunate lovers are then denied religious burial, but a compassionate monk defies his superiors to perform the rites.

Stevens is a playwright of genuine talent, ever ready to explore new ideas and methods of expression. Here he has devised a speech that is neither poetry nor prose, but that rather falls between the two. It is eloquent and colorful, though it lacks the flash of inspiration and the true gift of illumination.

The Playwrights' Company and Gayle Stine have given "The Lovers" a stunning production. The setting by Charles Elson is gorgeous. It consists of a series of ramps in front of a huge cyclorama on which arresting backgrounds are projected. And the costumes by John Boyt are appropriately eye-filling.

DIRECTOR MICHAEL Gordon rightly staged the piece in a robustious style. His groupings are striking, indeed. His handling of ensembles is highly effective. Pictorially, the new arrival at the Martin Beck Theatre is magnificent.

We particularly liked Hurd Hatfield as a sympathetic and understanding man of God. Darren McGavin was manly as the seigneur who permitted his heart to overpower his innate sense of decency. Joanne Woodward was quite glowing and extremely pretty as the victim of his desire.

Mario Alcalde was fittingly gauche as the rough and impetuous young husband. Morris Carnovsky, Vivian Nathan, Norman Rose, Pernell Roberts, Robert Burr and Bramwell Fletcher did justice to other roles.

"The Lovers" is a play to respect and admire, for it seeks to bring back the grand manner to the theatre. It is a worthy attempt to restore vitality and vigor to a stage that has lost too much of both. It has imagination and a goodly measure of tempestuous beauty. But we doubt that it will have popular appeal.

New York Post

May 11, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Tragedy of a Medieval Triangle

The alleged medieval custom known as "droit de seigneur," by which the lord of the manor had the first-night privilege of sleeping with the bride of any of his vassals, has usually been disapproved of by modern moralists. It is indicative of the independent viewpoint of Leslie Stevens, author of "The Lovers," that his new play, which opened last evening at the Martin Beck Theater, finds a lot to defend in the legendary practice. Mr. Stevens doesn't insist that it always worked out happily, but he feels there is much to be said for the lord's attitude in the matter.

I should add without more delay that I am no admirer of "The Lovers," regarding it as confused, dramatically ineffectual and given to an unintentional air of pretentiousness. But, despite my discontent, I think it supplies evidence that Mr. Stevens, whose "Bullfight" attracted considerable favorable attention several seasons ago, is a playwright of commendable ambition, unhackneyed approach to his subject matter, and courageous determination to have his say in his own fashion. Since these are admirable qualities, I wish I liked his new work more than I do.

The Intention

The chief trouble, it seems to me, is the natural and quite understandable one that his ambitions are still considerably more than his capacities. In "The Lovers," he set out to give us a tragic romantic story with lyric overtones and to fill it with compassion for troubled human hearts and passions, understanding of both the lowly and the highly placed, and a sense of almost universal pity. It is certainly a worthy goal, and it strikes me as his chief achievement that, using material that could well be laughed at, he never lets it get out of hand.

But it is also my impression that he does everything in the hardest possible way. Instead of telling his story of the young vassal, the girl bride and the sympathetic but imperious lord directly, he has adopted a system that moves back and forth between the basic events of his story and the effect it has on others. He begins with a strolling friar, who must be one of the unluckiest men in the recent drama. The poor fellow is minding his own business when he encounters a sad sister in need of his ministrations, and there he is in the middle of a medieval triangle.

Slaughtered Trio

The three members of the triangle lie slaughtered, and the friar is asked to tell whether they have died in sin. It seems that the lord had taken advantage of his "droit de seigneur," but it turns out that he had really loved the girl and she had been far from cold to him, and it is clear that the author has equal sympathy for all of them, including the bewildered young bridegroom. I don't deny that it is splendid for him to pity all concerned, but I can't help feeling that his characters fail to be touching and that their plight hardly ever achieves dramatic poignancy.

A large number of actors are involved, and, while some of them fail to create the illusion of their medieval period, they play forthrightly and ably. Most effective at capturing the feeling of a distant age were, I thought, Hurd Hatfield as the friar, Pernell Roberts as a stalwart brother of the lord, Mario Alcalde as the young bridegroom, and Vivian Nathan as the sister. Darren McGavin and Joanne Woodward, in the title roles, have greater difficulty in eluding the 20th century. Charles Elson's setting is of vast help. But "The Lovers" seems to me, in the end, ineffectual.

Journal American

May 11, 1956

Play Marked By Ingenuity

Explosive Material Presented Effectively and Beautifully

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE "DROIT DE SEIGNEUR" was a charming medieval conceit which permitted the feudal lord of a domain to take the bride of any of his serfs to his chamber on her wedding night. Leslie Stevens has fashioned a new play, "The Lovers," from this explosive material and it was presented last night at the Martin Beck Theatre.

It requires no electronic brain to figure that the elements he would bring into conflict are the young husband, who isn't going to go along with the custom, and the nobleman who is. To do this he has employed a large cast, a simple though majestic single set, wonderfully well lit, and a form of mass movement not seen since the late, lamented days of "Tamburlaine."

Basis There

It is an ambitious and rather particular type play; it won't appeal to everybody, but it is certainly meritorious.

I find it difficult to accept an idea which seems almost ludicrous in terms of what we call the modern enlightenment of mankind. But the basis in history is there, and with a certain amount of persuasion and good writing by Stevens we find ourselves resigned to the fact that a warrior lord of France, in the 12th Century, is about to exercise his ordained right in usurping the beautiful young bride of one of his minions on her wedding evening.

The switch in this instance is the fact that the nobleman is a worthy character. He will not press his privileged prerogative; he truly loves the lass.

But the young husband and his friends are neither aware nor sympathetic.

There is an uprising which strains the solid tenets of the church and state. All ends in disaster.

The author has chosen a flash-back technique to tell his story, and it has been developed with enormous ingenuity.

By Flash-Back

The dead girl's sister is explaining what happened to Hurd Hatfield, an itinerant monk. Actors move about in large numbers, the flat backdrop changed in hue from early dawn to angry mid-day, fading finally into the half light of dusk.

There is little on the stage but a set of canted steps, yet the illusion of interiors, gardens, fields, is sustained. Michael Gordon has invested his players with exhaustive energy.

Darren McGavin, as the lucky lord, gives a driving and robust interpretation of this demanding and highly demonstrative role. Joanne Woodward is beautiful and lingeringly helpless as the child bride.

Mario Alcalde, Vivian Nathan, Morris Carnovsky and Bramwell Fletcher lend their acknowledged talents to the other major parts.

"The Lovers" has stature and distinction; it may not become a so-called "hot ticket," but it is never mediocre.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 11, 1956

THEATER

'The Lovers'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN THE lavish costume melodrama that the Playwright's Company brought to the Martin Beck Thursday evening, Hurd Hatfield plays an anguished friar confronted with a double murder, a grisly suicide, and a community raging for blood. As he patiently sorts out the facts that have given birth to so much mayhem, he murmurs "There is something beneath the crust here." But I'm afraid there isn't.

* * *

The crust itself is handsome enough. Designer Charles Elson has opened the spectacle with a breath-taking visual image: a peasant with a scythe stands poised on a jagged series of rocks before a vast, curved universe that seems to stretch to world's end. Playwright Leslie Stevens has had the theatrical boldness to hurl into his ranging pageant every trapping and trick the costumers and prop men could fetch from the dramatic warehouse: flowing tapestries, marching halberds, backgrounds of plain-chant, and pitched battles in which sparks really fly.

He has also had the courage to use the stage at its freest: letting his story flash backward and forward in time, dip into retrospection and plunge on into outright visions, much as he did in his experimental "Bullfight" of a few seasons ago and as "The Lark" is doing right now. He is a dramatist with a taste for short cuts, for scale, and for the sort of breakneck speed that gets on with things.

Yet a curious development has taken place: with a flexible stage and a fiercely flowing structure at his disposal, he has moved his essential narrative at snail's gait. His monkish detective settles down to endless preparatory conversation; revels and rituals and crowded neighborhood riots stop the story dead again and again; when a biting situation does come our way—a medieval nobleman demanding a subject's bride for the night, an incensed Abbot insisting on her return—the scene is whisked into the wings and handed back to us roundabout by various interested and disinterested third parties. The actors scurry; the play never does.

* * *

And I think there may be a reason for so much circuitous plotting and irrelevant invention. The basic emotions on which Mr. Stevens has built his towering carnival are extraordinary simple ones, too simple perhaps to justify quite so much fuss. A beautiful young girl is about to be married to her peasant swain ("Look at her run — good strong legs, full breasts, she's ready for seeding"). The local ruler sees her bathing in a pool, exercises his 'droit du seigneur,' and passionately carries her off ("I wanted you the way a stallion wants a mare!"). Finding that he loves her, he decides to keep her —and she is not altogether unwilling herself ("I felt the pupils of my eyes open" are the words in which she describes their meeting). Naturally, there is the devil to pay.

But there are, beneath the fairly fundamental passions and romantic postures, almost no psychological depths to be penetrated. Lust proves to be a somewhat uncomplicated drive; such complications as ensue have a candy-box air about them; and the rages that rise over three tumbling acts end in rococo excess. Helen of Troy couldn't have caused more trouble.

Mr. Stevens has not been able to give us a Helen, or any other passionate creatures of sufficient dimension. His players struggle vehemently. Hurd Hatfield forces his friar to a pitch of sharpness that is never quite present in the lines. Darren McGavin takes many a heroic stance, but this nobleman is a cardboard satyr. Joanne Woodward's unfortunate heroine is merely wistful, Mario Alcalde's husband merely roaring. When flashes do come—Vivian Nathan has one as a suddenly venomous sister of the bride, Morris Carnovsky another as a patriarch submitting to feudal law—they only accent the hollow fury around them.

The surface of "The Lovers" is sometimes brilliantly pictorial; its substance is lamentably thin.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

May 11, 1956

'The Lovers' a Big, Beautiful and Terribly Stuffy Costume Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The physical and literary schemes behind Leslie Stevens' drama, "The Lovers," which was given its premiere last evening at the Martin Beck Theatre, are admirable. It is splendid, visually, and it does its honest best to be splendid as a piece of playmaking; but, unhappily, as a piece of playmaking it takes itself much too seriously and is just plain stuffy.

Stevens, a young dramatist, has fancied himself a tale about Twelfth Century France, in which a feudal lord claims his feudal right to possess any bride on her wedding night. From such a plot playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais achieved "The Marriage of Figaro" when we were fighting our Revolutionary War, and later W. A. Mozart made a rollicking musical comedy out of it.

There isn't going to be any musical comedy based on "The Lovers," for it is far too solemn. Solemnity certainly is no crime, but the dullness solemnity so often inspires is—and "The Lovers" is at least a misdemeanor.

Fine Production

The production scheme of this new drama is, however, excellent. It uses the technique of such works as "Citizen Kane" and "The Lark" to work out a story in flashbacks—but, unlike these two admirable samples of the technique, it fails to rouse itself to a satisfying and stirring conclusion.

Stevens' story begins when an old friar learns that two men and a girl lie dead and have been denied the blessing of being forgiven their sins and being buried in sanctified ground. The friar, wanting to know how this has come about, pieces out the sad tale of the three corpses by talking to this one and that one, and as he listens the events themselves are re-lived.

One Bloody Mess

A peasant boy and a peasant girl get married. The lord of the domain, having seen this girl swimming in the raw in a bosky dell, desires her. So, according to law, he takes her—and then finds that he is honestly, decently in love with the lass. She is not exactly uncooperative, even though she claims she loves her peasant husband.

It all ends in a bloody mess. Girls kills self by falling on a scythe. Lord and boy peasant fight over her corpse, using sword and sickle respectively, and manage to murder each other. After having heard—and seen—all the facts, the old friar gives the three corpses absolution.

The writing of this work is not quite dull enough to be called pretentious, but it is dull enough. The setting of it, by Charles Elson, is beautifully pictorial and dramatically fluid. The only scenery is a multi-level stage and a cyclorama upon which all the moods of the sky are projected. Scene follows scene, flashback succeeds flashback, with the mere but miraculous changing of the lighting. The medieval costumes, by John Hoyt, are superb, and very often the Martin Beck stage offers a stirring picture.

On Their Toes

Under the direction of Michael Gordon, a large company runs about like a herd of mountain goats. As the inquisitive friar, Hurd Hatfield is gentle and effective. Darren McGavin makes a fine impersonation of a feudal baron, Joanne Woodward is quite lovely as the bride, and the best and most touching performance is being given by Vivian Nathan as the bride's sister—the woman who unfolds most of the story.

But I don't believe today's theatre will establish any landmarks until it discovers the difference between importance and self-importance.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 11, 1956

'The Lovers' Opens At the Martin Beck

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new play at the Martin Beck, "The Lovers," has one devastating strike against it. There is simply nothing about any of its principal characters or their problems which stirs up one's faintest interest.

The play is a turgid melodrama about the "droit du seigneur," which in the 12th century gave the lord of the manor the right to take any bride among his people for her wedding night.

In this case the lord happens upon a young girl while she is swimming, and there is a spontaneous affection between them.

Peasants Stirred Up.

When the lord makes his claim the girl is not actually averse to the plan. But her husband stirs up the peasants.

Finally she kills herself to prevent the revolt, and the two men kill each other.

This tale has all the earmarks of a tragedy of real stature. It falls down, and very flatly, in several major departments.

In the first place there is little or no characterization. The people have no life or personality outside the actual demands of this situation.

Libretto Without Music.

The language is neither colorful nor poetic. Its drabness occasionally makes the whole affair sound like an opera libretto without the music.

There is clearly not much the actors can do with such transparent roles. Few of them add much to what is in the script.

Hurd Hatfield brings a sense of tension and reality to a priest who causes the whole story to be recapitulated as he strives to find whether the dead deserve consecrated burial.

Darren McGavin is stalwart as the nobleman who loses his heart to the village girl, and Mario Alcalde is big, intense and inarticulate as the husband.

No Significant Dimension.

Joanne Woodward is unable to give the bride any significant dimension.

Morris Carnovsky gives the groom's father substantial quality, and Vivian Nathan makes of her sister a sincere, if somewhat monotonous, sufferer from a sense of guilt.

The telling of the story by endless flashbacks creates a disturbingly staccato meter.

1956 CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD WINNERS

Best American Play

"THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK"

Best Musical

"MY FAIR LADY"

Best Foreign Play

"TIGER AT THE GATES"